26 Assessing pragmatics: DCTs and retrospective verbal reports

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Abstract

Assessing pragmatic knowledge in the instructed setting is seen as a complex but necessary task, which requires the design of appropriate research methodologies to examine pragmatic performance. This study discusses the use of two different research methodologies, namely those of Discourse Completion Tests/Tasks (DCTs) and verbal reports. Research has shown that the use of DCTs in combination with verbal reports can increase the trustworthiness of the results (Félix-Brasdefer, 2010). Hence, taking into account the potential of verbal reports, the present study aims to investigate the cognitive processes undertaken by a group of English language learners as regards their pragmatic performance. Findings regarding the value of retrospective verbal reports are discussed together with practical recommendations for the use of DCTs and verbal reports to assess speech act performance in the instructed setting.

Keywords: pragmatics, speech acts, assessment, DCTs, retrospective verbal reports.

1.   Introduction

Assessment of Second Language/Foreign Language (SL/FL) pragmatics is a growing area in the field of Interlanguage Pragmatics (ILP). Several researchers have drawn their attention to this particular aspect, especially in recent years (see Beltrán-Palanques, 2013, 2014; Félix-Brasdefer, 2010; Roever, 2010, 2011; Ross

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& Kasper, 2013; Usó-Juan & Martínez-Flor, 2014). Pragmatics, which is one of the main components of the communicative competence model (Bachman, 1990; Usó-Juan & Martínez-Flor, 2006), should be appropriately introduced in the instructed setting in order to teach and assess this competence successfully. In this paper, I will focus on the issue of assessing pragmatics in the online instructed setting combining two different research methodologies: Discourse Completion Tests/Tasks (DCTs) and retrospective verbal reports. In the first part of the paper, I will provide a theoretical framework which focuses on the use of the two aforementioned research methodologies in the field of ILP. In the second part I will explain how the study was developed and the results derived from it. Finally, I will briefly discuss practical recommendations for the use of DCTs and verbal reports to assess speech act performance in the instructed setting.

2.   Theoretical framework

Verbal reports have been used in the field of ILP in combination with other research instruments, particularly those of role-plays (Beltrán-Palanques, 2013; Cohen & Olshtain, 1993; Félix-Brasdefer, 2008a, 2008b; Widjaja, 1997; Woodfield, 2012) and DCTs (Beltrán-Palanques, 2013; Robinson, 1992; Woodfield, 2008, 2010). However, for reasons of space, this paper is restricted to focus on the studies in which verbal reports were employed in combination with DCTs (see Beltrán-Palanques, 2013, 2014; Félix-Brasdefer, 2010).

One of the pioneering studies which used verbal reports in combination with written DCTs was conducted by Robinson (1992). The author combined concurrent (single-subject think-aloud) and retrospective verbal reports (i.e. interviews). The data obtained by means of verbal reports provided specific information about the planning process of refusal semantic formulae, evaluation of different utterances, pragmatic and linguistic difficulties, and knowledge sources. Woodfield (2008) employed paired concurrent verbal reports and retrospective verbal reports with three pairs of native speakers of English to provide insights concerning issues of validity noticed during the reconstruction of requests in 18 written DCTs. Woodfield (2010) explored the role of paired

concurrent and retrospective verbal reports to examine the cognitive processes of advanced learners of English as a SL on written DCTs which elicited status-unequal requests. The data obtained from concurrent verbal reports revealed that the social context of the discourse situation affected the pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic choices and language-related episodes showed participants' negotiation of lexical and grammatical elements when planning the request strategies. Regarding retrospective reports, the author reported that they offered information about participants' language of thought and the difficulties that participants experienced with the research methodology employed. More recently, Beltrán-Palanques (2013) conducted a study employing retrospective verbal reports in combination with both open role-plays and interactive written DCTs. In this study, the speech act under investigation was that of apologies. Results revealed that retrospective verbal reports appeared to be instrumental in gathering information regarding participants' pragmatic production.

In short, studies using verbal reports, either concurrently or retrospectively, in combination with DCTs, have shown the positive effects of this particular research methodology. Verbal reports seem to be instrumental in providing information as regards the participants' cognitive process, perceptions of speech act performance, validation of research instruments, sociocultural and sociolinguistic knowledge, as well as politeness issues. Hence, taking into account the literature review sketched above, the present study aims to contribute to this specific field of research by examining the potential of using interactive written DCTs in combination with retrospective verbal reports in an online instructed setting.

3.   The study

3.1.   Participants

This small explanatory study included 30 adult learners (12 male and 18 female) of an online English as a Foreign Language (EFL) course (mean age: 28.3). Participants were first asked to complete the UCLES Quick Placement Test

(Oxford University Press) to test their proficiency level. Results revealed that their proficiency level was B1, according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR – http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/source/framework_en.pdf). This particular result was expected, as participants were taking an online B1 course. Nevertheless, it was necessary to administer this placement test to appropriately identify participants' proficiency level. In addition to this, a background questionnaire was also administered in order to gather information regarding participants' personal information (e.g. age, gender, mother tongue) and FL learning experience (adapted from Beltrán-Palanques, 2013). Data gathered from the questionnaire revealed that participants were bilingual (i.e. Catalan and Spanish) and had studied English at school, secondary school and university.

3.2. The speech act under investigation

The pragmatic aspect under investigation in this study is the speech act of apologies. According to Searle (1979), apologies fall into the category of expressives, since they "express the psychological state specified in the sincerity condition about a state of affairs specified in the propositional content" (p. 15). Apologies are here defined as a "compensatory action to an offense in the doing of which S (the speaker) was causally involved and which is costly to H (the hearer)" (Bergman & Kasper, 1993, p. 82). Then, apologies can be used as remedial exchanges to restore harmony between speakers after a given offense (Goffman, 1971).

People often take part in remedial actions in which they attempt to save face (Brown & Levinson, 1987) and restore the social harmony of the speech community (Goffman, 1971). Following Brown and Levinson (1987), an apology is typically viewed as negative politeness whose main goal is that of providing a redressive action. From the domain of politeness, an apology is seen as a communicative event in which the speaker (i.e. the apologiser) should take into account the other interlocutor's face (i.e. the apologisee) in order to restore the situation (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Hence, apologising, as mentioned by Bataineh and Bataineh (2006), is a face-saving act for the hearer and a face-threatening act for the speaker.

3.3.   Instruments and procedure

The research methodology employed in this study consisted of interactive written DCTs (Beltrán-Palanques, 2013). This consists of eight different situations containing the following variables: social status (i.e. equal and hearer-dominant), social distance (i.e. stranger and acquaintance), and level of offense (high and low). However, in the present study, only four of the eight situations used in the aforementioned study were selected, specifically those involving the following variables: social status (i.e. equal), social distance (i.e. stranger and acquaintance), and level of offense (high and low). Table 1 shows the different situations.

Table 1.   Situations

Context of the situation		Variables		
		Social status	Social distance	Level of offense
Sit. 1	Bookshop	Equal	Stranger	Low
Sit. 2	University	Equal	Acquaintance	High
Sit. 3	Student's flat	Equal	Acquaintance	Low
Sit. 4	University	Equal	Stranger	High

Participants were grouped in pairs and they were asked to complete the interactive written DCTs in pairs. Immediately after the completion of each written cognitive task, participants took part in the retrospective verbal report. Tasks were performed using *Skype*. However, due to the interactive nature of the written DCTs, only one participant of each pair elicited the speech act under investigation (i.e. apologies). Participants could read back their written production before engaging them in the verbal probes. In so doing, participants were exposed to their own production, in order to make them aware of what they produced. Participants were allowed to use Catalan, Spanish and/or English during the verbal probes, since in this case, the major goal was to examine participants' thoughts while performing the tasks, rather than exploring their spoken competence in English. Furthermore, it was believed that allowing them to use their L1 would facilitate the verbal reporting. Verbal reports were recorded in order to further examine participants' contributions. The retrospective verbal reports were transcribed following Jefferson's (2004) transcript notation.

4.   Results and discussion

This section provides an overview of the results of this study. Table 2 displays the results derived from the retrospective verbal reports.

Table 2.   Situations

Verbal reports	Situations			
	Situation 1	Situation 2	Situation 3	Situation 4
Grammar and lexicon	7	6	7	9
Social status	7	4	5	8
Social distance	8	5	5	9
Level of offense	9	12	10	15

Each participant was asked to take part in the verbal report, which focused on aspects related to grammar and lexicon, and pragmatic knowledge. As mentioned above, only one of the participants in each pair took part in the apology production. Therefore, only the data derived from the participants who produced apology sequences are shown here.

Regarding grammar and lexicon, retrospective verbal reports revealed that, in general, participants focused on aspects related to grammar and lexicon when planning their pragmatic production, especially in the fourth situation (i.e. nine participants out of 15). This could be related to the fact that this situation in particular could be more demanding for participants since it involved the following context: two equal participants who were strangers and whose level of offense was high. As a matter of fact, most participants indicated that this situation was very offensive for the other interlocutor since it involved damaging students' class notes. It is worth mentioning that participants were students, so perhaps they perceived this as very offensive.

Concerning social status, participants indicated that in situations 1 and 4 this particular variable seemed to have affected the way they addressed their interlocutors. In this case, all the participants shared the same social status, and they revealed that the fact that they had the same status affected their production.

According to them, having a different social status could involve apologising in a different manner, thus, using more strategies to restore the situation. As regards this specific variable, participants did not provide much information, probably due to the fact that they all shared the same social status.

Social distance, according to the results obtained in the verbal reporting, appeared not to have a great impact on participants' pragmatic production. As a matter of fact, eight and nine participants mentioned this specific variable in the situations 1 and 4, in which social distance was that of stranger. According to the verbal reporting, in the other remaining two situations (i.e. 2 and 3), containing acquaintance social distance, a lower number of participants seemed to have paid attention to this issues, particularly five participants in each one.

Finally, retrospective verbal reports revealed that the severity of offence played a paramount role. As a matter of fact, those situations whose level of offense was classified as high seemed to have received the attention of the majority of the participants. Particularly, situations 2 and 4, in which the severity of offense was classified as high, called participants' attention as they involved situations which violated social norms.

The results of this study are in line with previous works in the field, in which verbal reports were also instrumental in revealing participants' information regarding their speech act performance in DCTs (Beltrán-Palanques, 2013; Robinson, 1992; Woodfield, 2008, 2010). Robinson (1992) indicated that verbal reports were useful to obtain information about attended aspects, and indications of linguistic and pragmatic difficulties, among others. Woodfield (2008) found that verbal reports were instrumental in identifying participants' attention while working on the tasks. Similarly, Woodfield's (2010) study revealed that retrospective verbal reports provided information regarding participants' cognitive processes while on task. Beltrán-Palanques (2013) found that verbal reports were instrumental in providing information regarding participants' pragmatic knowledge. In this explanatory study, retrospective verbal reports were also useful to obtain information related to participants' attention to grammar and lexicon features as well as pragmatic knowledge.

5.   Conclusions

The aim of this explanatory study was to contribute to the growing body of literature that employs verbal reports in combination with other research instruments, particularly DCTs. Results from this study are consistent with previous research in the field, since retrospective verbal reports were instrumental in providing further information concerning participants' speech act production. Several studies have concluded that verbal reports, in their various forms (i.e. concurrent and retrospective) can be of paramount interest, given that researchers can obtain further information related to learners' pragmatic performance. This, in turn, can benefit language teachers in their tasks of developing instructional approaches aim to (i) integrate speech acts; and (ii) better understand how learners at different levels process and perform pragmatic utterances in contextualised situations. Empirical studies whose goal is to obtain participants' thoughts while performing cognitive tasks, such as DCTs, should employ verbal reports, since this tool allows researchers to better understand participants' pragmatic behaviour. Moreover, the use of DCTs and verbal reports can also be of paramount interest for instruction, as a tool to obtain information about learners' pragmatic performance, and to improve instructional approaches as well as design them drawing on empirical findings.

6.   Acknowledgements

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